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Spring 2019

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Meadows, Jodi J., "Resisting Commodification in Honors Education" (2019). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 622.
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Resisting Commodification in Honors Education

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Abstract: The commodification of education is an increasing threat to university honors programs. In honors, we seek to unpack this transactional model of education and uncover the inherent joy of learning. Honors professionals can challenge the commodification of education by helping students contextualize their educational experiences and by facilitating joyful, self-directed learning. Framed by research of both gifted K–12 students and college honors students, this article explores specific conversations and course designs that may combat a commodification culture and foster self-reflection and self-direction in honors students.

Keywords: honors, commodification, course design, self-directed learning

The commodification of education is an increasing threat to honors. As Digby (2016) succinctly stated, “The idea of teaching students how to think and how to expand their intellectual and cultural world has been overwhelmed by utilitarian ends” (p. 35). The particulars of this commodification, including students completing more college credit through AP and dual enrollment, have received attention in higher education at large as well as in the honors community (Camp & Waters, 2016; Cayton, 2007; Guzy, 2016; Walsh, 2016). In honors, we seek to unpack this transactional model of education and uncover the inherent joy of learning, to present students with “in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education” (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2019). In our ongoing conversation with students, honors professionals can challenge the commodification of education by helping them contextualize their educational experiences and by facilitating joyful, self-directed learning

In the honors program at Southwest Baptist University, this conversation begins in a one-credit, extended orientation course called “Honors University Seminar.” The text is *Becoming a Learner: Realizing the Opportunity of Education* by Matthew Sanders. Sanders (2018) tackled the commodification of education by addressing what he called the “distracting conversations” (p. 23) that can be prevalent among students entering higher education. These conversations include “I’m going to college so I can get a good job”; “I have to go to college if I want a good life”; and “I’m paying for this so it better be good.” In response to these notions, Sanders offered students an alternative narrative: college is a path to growth in creativity, critical thinking, communication skills, and character. He extended a gracious invitation to become a learner.

In our class discussion of the text last fall, one honors freshman was particularly indignant. After twelve years of unrelenting success in formal education, this class was the first time she remembered any educator presenting school as learning, as an opportunity for personal development and discovery. She had always viewed school as a transaction, a grade game that she always won. Unfortunately, she felt she had also lost the opportunity to be genuinely challenged and engaged. This realization opened a path for her out of the school-as-transaction paradigm and into the process of becoming a volitional learner.

As this example illustrates, honors students may benefit from an explicit understanding of the nature of their educational situation. One element of that situation is the increased effect of standardization in public schools on the lives of gifted learners (Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009). Research suggests that gifted students are often underserved (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). As a result, a gifted student may become bored, disengaged, and underachieving (Landis & Reschly, 2013). The students who manage to stay engaged or at least to continue achieving the standards of the system often find their way to honors in college. They may bring a commodified, ultra-pragmatic view of school with them.

Honors professionals are in a unique position to assist students in contextualizing their personal experience within a broader perspective. As students examine their own high school experiences and the effect on their approach to school, education, and learning, they form their honors identity within the community. They begin to develop “insightful awareness” (Roesner, Peck, & Nasir, 2006, p. 416) of their educational environment that can be liberating. Students often recognize a wide range of educational

issues, including underdeveloped study behaviors (Mendaglio, 2013) and perfectionism (Speirs Neumeister, 2004), as having developed through interaction with their K–12 educational environment. They identify with other honors students who may have not only similar academic aptitude but similar educational histories. Through this process, they can develop language to distinguish between education as a credential and learning as an opportunity for growth.

Another way we can resist the commodification of education is by facilitating joyful, self-directed learning, which—given the culture of toxic transactionalism—is both completely natural and nearly impossible: natural because curious learning is a normative behavior for healthy humans, but nearly impossible because some of our students have never practiced a joyful approach to learning. Unfortunately, practices in education that focus on extrinsic motivational tools (grades, behavior management, and competition between students) tend to increase as students progress through school, often resulting in a decrease in students' curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn (Roesner et al., 2006). It can be a challenge to “move students who are focused on their credentials away from running the gauntlet to relaxing into a new academic society” (Digby, 2016, p. 33). However, our job is to do just that by making our honors curriculum as student-centered as possible.

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) includes a “distinctive learner-directed environment” in its definition of honors education (NCHC, 2019). This model can confound the commodification of education. When educational experiences are challenging and meaningful and students have close relationships with teachers, their intrinsic motivation can increase (Roesner, et al. 2006, p. 414). This environment in honors may position students to experience the joy of interest-driven learning.

In contrast, compulsory experiences are rarely joyful and generally contribute to the transactional model of education. To develop self-efficacy, individuals must feel they have an appropriate level of autonomy, of self-direction. According to Bandura (1997), “self-directedness not only contributes to success in formal instruction but also promotes lifelong learning (p. 174). Individuals must be free to take actions as directed by their values and goals. This synergy between values and actions forms identity, or “self-authorship” (Baxter-Magolda, 2009). To the extent we facilitate growth in self-directed, interest-driven, joyful learning, we are counteracting the effects of commodification. Although self-direction is a bedrock principle of honors, authentic student choice is not always simple to produce in practice. Curricular trends,

complicated advising, and advisor overload can reduce even the most idealistic honors professionals to checklist markers. We must persist in the challenge to preserve student self-direction beginning at recruitment and continuing through classroom learning and individual advising.

Honoring student choice can begin at selection and admission. At our institution, we do not wish for any student to feel compelled to participate in honors because of scholarships. Thus, although the honors program provides other benefits (priority housing, priority enrollment, yearly all-expense-paid regional cultural trips), no scholarships are associated with honors program participation. While not necessarily appropriate for every institution, in our case the no-scholarships policy allows students to choose their honors path without any financial consideration. On the curricular level, we have an honors core to promote honors community during the first year; however, the remainder of honors hours, which consist of honors general education courses and a variety of one-hour, honors-only topical colloquia and reading groups, are chosen by the student. We are continually developing additional programming, giving students as much choice as possible in planning their own honors curriculum and fostering a sense of autonomy and self-direction that may result in joyful, interest-driven learning.

The honors program's individual courses encourage "a learner-directed environment" as well as "student-driven learning projects" (NCHC, 2019). In response to the commodification and standardization of education, honors should foster an ever more novel opportunity for students to pursue interest-driven learning within the honor curriculum. Among honors students, "one cannot overestimate the importance of interest in high levels of performance" (Siegle, Rubenstein, Pollard, & Romey, 2010, p. 95). As we travel with students toward self-authorship, they can become partners with whom we codesign the learning experience (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009). When we seek to create a truly student-directed learning environment, we must necessarily cede some of our own power to students; Brookfield (2013) describes this type of teaching as taking account of power dynamics, illustrating how power works, and rendering teacher power transparent and open to critique.

As an example, in honors colloquia, we begin with a large question. This semester, one colloquium is asking, "How did the Lewis and Clark expedition illustrate the virtues and vices of the early American story?" Students may choose from three formats in response to the framing question: traditional research essay, class presentation, or creative response. In past colloquia,

creative responses have included the production of a children's book and a rap performance that included an annotated copy of the meaning of the lyrics, paintings, and songs.

Although students may initially resist such open-ended assignments, with scaffolding and clear instruction they generally begin to see themselves as subjects in learning instead of objects of education. Although this kind of student-centered teaching is widely practiced in honors, we must remind ourselves that we are not simply producing clever teaching tricks to keep students' attention. The authentic, self-directed, interest-guided learning experiences within the honors community can be truly transformative both to the student and to the culture of commodification.

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